

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 26th March 2023 – Lent 5

(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer.

The name Xenophanes in the seventh paragraph is pronounced 'Zeno-fain-ese!')

Readings: **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Romans 8:6-11

Psalm 130

John 11:1-45

Is it too much to suggest that when we love another person we grieve when tough things happen to them, and we grieve when, for some reason, they have gone? It seems to be an intrinsic part of being human, and I think some griefs are easier to bear than others. This is particularly evident in funerals for when an elderly person dies, and they've lived a great life, and they have been in great relationship with friends and family it's sad... but it is also a celebration. Why would we not want to live such a life? There are tears – but there's also laughter from stories and anecdotes drawn from the years. This is very different to the grief experienced when a child dies because all that was looked forward to can now never be. There is something about the smaller coffin – sometimes white – that cries out something dreadfully wrong has happened here!

Unexpected death of adults also seems harder – whether through accident, sudden illness or suicide. It is harder because there has been no time to say 'Goodbye!', or 'I love you!', or even... 'I'm sorry!' There is simply an unfinished conversation, and a longing for that person that can now never be fulfilled.

I wonder if you are currently grieving, and if so - what you are doing with that grief? Because there are things we can do to ease and enable the grief journey...

In the Gospel this weekend we meet two sisters grieving the loss of their brother Lazarus. They had hoped that their friend Jesus would come and heal him, but Jesus had been delayed and he arrived after Lazarus had died. They explained the situation and, in response... Jesus began to weep. The King James translation of John 11:35 states it more strongly with the affirmation that 'Jesus wept!'

I find this a helpful image – the Messiah, the anointed one, the one we call Son of God, weeping when a friend had died. There is in this some sense of divine solidarity with and compassion for humanity. It affirms that Jesus knew, as we know, what it means to have loved and lost!

So, for the parent who has lost a child, and for all who have been bereaved... 'Jesus wept!' For the women who live daily with the reality of domestic violence... 'Jesus wept!' For those left isolated and alone because of mental illness... 'Jesus wept!' For the ongoing

conflict in Ukraine, and the now many millions of refugees who have been forced to leave behind all that is familiar... 'Jesus wept!'

The ancient Greek Philosopher Xenophanes would scoff at my suggestion that the phrase 'Jesus wept!' offers significant insight into the nature of God. Two and half thousand years ago Xenophanes concluded that human beings unhelpfully imagine gods to have human feelings and human forms. In this he was critiquing the widely held belief in Greece that a large and dysfunctional family of gods lived on Mount Olympus, ruled by a father figure called Zeus. So, a Son of God who wept for the death of one person is not a notion Xenophanes would have accepted.

Yet weeping was entirely consistent with other things that Jesus said and did. For, in the image of God being a Good Shepherd the ninety-nine sheep were left alone in good pasture while the shepherd went to search and find the one who was lost! In the parable of the Prodigal Son, God was said to be like a father who loved his wayward child so much that he was willing to forgive, way beyond what was reasonable and wise!

A God who loves us more than we deserve; a God who keeps searching for us until we are found; and a God who grieves when we grieve. This is an understanding that shapes the way I read the Scriptures and live in the world... and this is probably true for many of you?

However, there's more to Christian faith than accepting God being real, loving, and ever-present, for, we also believe that God transforms. In the Gospel today we not only hear about Jesus weeping about the death of Lazarus, but also Jesus calling Lazarus out of the tomb. Somehow – death was transformed into new life, and what had been understood to be an ending, was transformed into a new beginning.

We have been reminded of this in the Gospel readings of recent weeks. Two weeks ago we heard about a Samaritan woman's life being transformed after a long conversation with Jesus. A conversation that gave her courage to speak boldly to a community that had formerly shunned her; and, last week, we heard about a man born blind being given sight by Jesus. Like the woman at the well, that man then spoke boldly about the person who had brought about this life-giving transformation.

However, it is not only in the Greek writing of the New Testament that we hear of God bringing about transformation. Today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel, originally written in Hebrew, describes an extraordinary transformation. In Ezekiel's vision there was a valley of dry bones and Ezekiel was challenged by God to speak to those bones. In response, the bones moved together and formed skeletons; tendons, muscles and skin formed over the bones; and the valley was left full of lifeless corpses. Ezekiel was again challenged to speak, and in response God breathed into each corpse and, impossibly, each body was given life.

The vision was not something that would literally happen in the future, and Ezekiel understood that the bones were a metaphor for the discouraged and defeated people of Israel. But, it gave hope, and it assured the Jewish community that against the odds God would put them back together and restore them to life.

Through the resurrection of Christ we have an assurance that with God our physical death is not the end of our story, and there will be a future transformation and new life... even, eternal life. But, in this life we experience things that can overwhelm us and bring us down and in response we might wonder if we can ever stand again; ever trust again; ever love again; or, ever again... have reason to hope?

If we're up for it, we can find in Christ someone who will not only weep with us in our journey; not only give us what we need to keep going; but someone who will also bring about transformation. Someone who will put our metaphorical bones back together and breathe new life into us; someone who will put the broken pieces of our church community back together and breathe new life into it; even someone who will gather the complex brokenness of our world into some sort of order, and breathe new life into it... again, and again, and again. Isn't that why we pray, 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven... forever, and ever... Amen'

Would you please join me in prayer...

Gracious God, we give thanks that you are compassionate, and infinitely wise. We offer to you the brokenness within our lives and ask for greater wholeness. We also offer to you the brokenness of our community, and our world, and ask that we may each play our part in bringing about transformation and greater wholeness to these. We pray in the name of the risen Christ, Amen.

Possible focus questions for small group work or personal reflection:

1. When you look back at the toughest times of your life, where has God been for you? If you feel comfortable to do so, please share with another person, or with the group.
2. The thirteenth century saint, Bishop Richard of Chichester, wrote a prayer that was adapted into the following lyrics of the song, 'Day by Day'.

*"Day by day. Day by day, Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray:
to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, Day by Day."*

How helpful is this prayer for you? and, whatever your response, why is that?